

The headline announcing Dave Van Ronk's death in Reuters said, "Folk Pioneer," but I always thought of him as more than that. First and foremost I thought of him as a blues singer, even though he did old traditional ballads, and later on tackled Joni Mitchell and Randy Newman songs as well as writing a few of his own.

Even though he was a native of Brooklyn, Van Ronk will always be associated with Greenwich Village – the way it once was – and had a personality that was the definition of hip in its original sense. Big, bearded, sloppy in his dress, his music was anything but sloppy. He set the standard for New York City guitar pickers in the mid-'60s. His guitar work was clean and intricate without being flashy. I remember friends figuring his licks to "Cocaine" (to this day the definitive version of that song) and other songs from his albums. And that guitar style had its influence down the line on other musicians. When the first Hot Tuna album came out, and people I knew were raving, my reaction was, they listened to Dave Van Ronk.

Van Ronk was one of the first "folk" musicians to truly take the blues seriously, not just play a blues as another folk song. He went back and figured out the guitar parts, bringing the music of Blind Willie McTell, Blind Lemon Jefferson and many others to a new generation of listeners. Yes, later on others would delve even deeper, but he got the ball rolling. He also seemed to delight in making musical connections, recording with a Dixieland band in the early '60s, doing "Mack the Knife" with a jug band (still one of the best versions I've heard of that song) or combining the songs of Joni Mitchell, Scott Joplin, Jelly Roll Morton, Leroy Carr, Blind Blake and Bing Crosby on one album and making it a unified whole.

As important as his guitar work was, it is his singing for which he'll be remembered. He had a voice to match his big, bearish looks. Initially it sounds like he's singing in a hoarse growl somewhat reminiscent of Louis Armstrong. Listen closer and the growl is almost gentle, even tender, alternating between going at full force, and quietly coaxing and caressing whatever words he was singing. Sometimes, while scatting Van Ronk could take it to extremes, but even his earliest recordings reveal a master in full dynamic control of what he was doing. Most important of all, he always sang like he meant it with plenty of heart and soul to spare. And while his early records will always mean the most to me because of their associations with that time in my life, his later recordings reveal he had turned his vocal mastery into his own personal art form.

Van Ronk's influence on Bob Dylan is incalculable. He was friend, mentor and teacher, letting the young Dylan sleep on his couch, and not only teaching him guitar licks, but about poetry, literature, politics and more than likely how to get along in New York. Dylan took Van Ronk's arrangement of "House of the Rising Sun," recorded on his first album

before Van Ronk had a chance too, which eventually led to The Animals making it a hit. Van Ronk, to his credit, didn't let it get in the way of their friendship. I always counted Van Ronk among the severely missing in the 30th Anniversary tribute to Dylan at Madison Square Garden.

Though he was undeniable part of the New York folk scene, Van Ronk managed to stay above the petty arguments and squabbles that would often dominate the pages of *Sing Out!* and *Broadside* magazine. His response to the electric versus acoustic controversy was to record an album with a (sort-of) rock band, the **Hudson Dusters**. While that album is probably his least impressive work, it does have its usually very funny moments. And it also has my all-time personal favorite Van Ronk track, "Dink's Song." This song, originally collected by John and Alan Lomax is a strange hybrid of a ballad and a blues. Van Ronk's singing here is beyond amazing, and more than 30 years and hundreds of listens later, it hits me as hard as the first time I heard it.

As great as Van Ronk's many recordings were, he was best experienced in person. A big man with a big guitar, he'd sit on a stool and within seconds of singing be soaked in sweat. He had dry, but extremely funny sense of humor and a whiskey and cigarettes wheeze of a laugh that seemed to go on long after he actually stopped laughing. I was lucky enough to see him many times throughout the years. The last time was the most curious of all, at J.C. Dobbs, Philadelphia's main rock and roll bar at the time. Dobbs was the last place I expected Van Ronk to be playing. It was the main hangout for local musicians, and had a kind of charming dumpy atmosphere. Even though the place had been fixed up over the years, the feeling that it was actually a dump never left. Van Ronk played on a Sunday afternoon. There was always something about Van Ronk that seemed perfect for a Sunday afternoon, and I was concerned if people would show up because Dobbs was not exactly a place the folk audience in Philly went to. Small tables and chairs were put out on what was normally the dance (usually the standing) floor. Dave came out, sat down, and proceeded to essentially hypnotize the audience for a couple of hours. Even the rock musicians (who were *always*) at Dobbs and are the most cynical of music critics were amazed.

Dave Van Ronk never sold a lot of records, was on a major label that didn't matter (Mercury) briefly, and never made it past the club and coffee house circuit. Over the 50 plus years he'd been recording and performing there were undoubtedly years where he probably made more money teaching guitar in his Greenwich Village apartment than he did from performing or records. But there is no doubt that the New York folk scene wouldn't have been the same without him.

My favorite one is probably his most famous, *Folksinger* (originally on Prestige and now available on Fantasy). It starts with "He Was A Friend of Mine," which the Byrds later turned into a tribute to JFK, has the definitive "Cocaine," a great cover of Reverend Gary Davis' "Samson and Delilah," and "Hang Me, Oh Hang Me," which the Grateful Dead later did as "Been All Around This World."

The cover shot today is still classic. Van Ronk sitting in front of the original Folklore Center on MacDougal Street, wailing beneath the fire escapes and the Folklore Center sign. Somehow that photo captures both him and the Village.

"I never thought of myself as a 'folksinger' at all. Still don't. What I did was to combine traditional fingerpicking guitar with a repertory of old jazz tunes. This then is the statement not of a folk musician, but of a kind of jazz singer manqué. I like to think I was starting to get the hang of it."

—Dave Van Ronk
from the liner notes to *The Folkways Years 1969-61*